3.4 Scenery

Introduction

The Como Forest Health project area is directly north of the Lake Como Recreation Area. The Lake Como Recreation Area largely serves recreationists from Ravalli and Missoula counties in Montana and Lemhi County in Idaho. To a lesser extent, the Lake Como Recreation Area attracts visitors from across the United States. The recreation area provides a full complement of recreation opportunities and receives about 200,000 visitors annually. Recreation opportunities include: developed campgrounds, day use picnic areas, fishing, boating, and swimming in Lake Como, a horse camp area, rental cabin and pavilion, accessible nature trails, and access to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. Other popular recreation activities in the area surrounding the Lake Como Recreation Area include student educational field trips, hiking and backpacking, viewing scenery, mountain bike and horseback riding, and cross-country skiing and ice fishing in the winter.

The Lake Como Recreation Area and surrounding forest is experiencing a mountain pine beetle infestation and increasing ponderosa pine mortality. The recreation area was thinned in 2012 and 2013 to protect the larger diameter ponderosa pine from mountain pine beetle infestation and campground aesthetics, and remove the hazards of dead and dying trees from the most heavily used areas. Recent surveys (May 2013) in the Como Forest Health project area indicate the mountain pine beetle population may be stabilizing or declining. However, many ponderosa pine stands have densities above 80 BA (basal area, measured in ft^2/acre) and as such, are still at risk of mountain pine beetle infestation and would support a population rebound (PF-SILV-003).

The purpose of the Como Forest Health project is to:

- Reduce potential mountain pine beetle-caused mortality in large diameter ponderosa pine
- Reduce fuel loads and maintain historic fire return intervals in the project area
- Improve forest resilience to mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir beetle, and dwarf mistletoe,
- Maintain the visual integrity of the larger Lake Como Recreation Area.

Three alternatives to the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) are carried through analysis, including the No Action alternative. The project is located within the views of several highly sensitive viewing areas including Lake Como and Forest Roads and trails and Highway 93 Bitterroot Valley travel corridor. This analysis addresses project effects on scenery from sensitive viewing areas relative to direction and guidance in the 1987 Bitterroot National Forest Plan (Forest Plan).

3.4.1 Overview of Issues Addressed

Scenic resource issues were identified through internal and external scoping processes and analysis of the alternatives. The issues are addressed through project design, mitigation where feasible, and effects analysis. The following scenery issues were received during scoping and are addressed in the analysis.

- How would project implementation affect scenic integrity under the alternative treatments?
- How would timber harvest units impact views from Lake Como?

3.4.1.1 Issue Indicators

Scenic resource issue indicators measured at both the site and regional level:

- Change in landscape character.
- Whether the Forest Plan goals for scenery and the Visual Quality Objective (VQO) standard and are met.

3.4.2 Affected Environment

3.4.2.1 Existing Condition

Existing Landscape Character/Place Setting

The existing landscape character or place setting describes the project area within the context of the larger landscape scene. It provides a framework for predicting the degree of scenery modification and creating design criteria and mitigation measures to reduce or limit that modification. The project is located within the rolling foothill slopes of the towering Bitterroot Mountains. Lake Como is a manmade reservoir that is a spectacular water feature. This large lake dominates the views within the area. Several creeks and small intermittent streams flow through the hillsides that define the undulating terrain of the project area. Ponderosa pine is the dominant tree species in the project area though Douglas-fir and aspen are well represented. Small and sporadic pockets of aspen create visual interest in the landscape. Recreation trails, day use areas, campgrounds, and a trailhead parking are adjacent to the Como Forest Health project area. Past management activities have created some variety in vegetation age and density. Lost Horse and Lick Creek flow east through the project area, distinguished by the tall green masses of aspen, cottonwoods and willows. Further to the east, flat to slightly undulating agriculture fields are scattered with houses and barns. This agriculture setting fills most of the basin and sits below the grassy foothills that lie beneath the forested slopes of the Bitterroot Valley.

The Bitterroot Mountains provides a rising backdrop for the entire valley. Conifer covered foothills contrast with the edge of lower pasturelands. Brown areas of dead trees from past fires or disease are also intermixed across the mountain slopes. Across the surrounding hillsides, natural appearing openings show as sparse, lighter colored grassy areas and sharp edges of past clear cuts contrast against the dark green slopes. Mountain peaks contrast against the skyline creating a visually dominating horizon edge. Within the Lake Como recreation area, beaches, trails, roads campgrounds, and the trailhead are evidence of the affinity the public has for the recreation area.

Landscape Visibility

This section addresses the relative importance and sensitivity of what is seen and perceived in the landscape. Landscape visibility consists of three elements: 1) travelways and use areas 2) concern (or sensitivity) levels, and 3) distance zones. As part of this inventory, travelways and use areas in the proximity to the analysis areas were identified and their concern levels documented. Distance zones were also identified in relation to the project area. The process for identifying distance zones and concern levels is described below.

Distance zones are an important part of scenery analysis because as the distance increases the level of visible detail decreases. Also, as distance increases so does the opportunity to mitigate the impacts. Visibility is also affected by topography, steep terrain, ridges, and road cuts that can affect sightlines.

Topography and vegetation are factors used during project level planning and design. Distance zones are measured from the viewpoint and are divided into five (5) categories:

1. Immediate Foreground, 0 to 300 feet
2. Foreground, 300 feet to ½ mile
3. Middleground, ½ to 4 miles
4. Background, 4 miles to horizon
5. Seldom seen, areas not normally visible from the ground due to topography and lack of access.

Concern (or Sensitivity) levels are a measure of the degree of importance the public places on a landscape being viewed from a particular travelway or use area. Three (3) sensitivity levels are used. Level 1 is the most important and Level 3 the least important. Sensitivity level is a function of both the number of visitors as well as their intent.

1. Level 1 is associated with major highways, areas of concentration such as recreation facilities, special designations such as scenic byways or national recreation/historic trails and cultural sites. Users have a high level of concern for scenery. These can be roads, trails or waterways.
2. Level 2 areas are of lesser importance such as state highways, county roads, secondary trails, scenic overlooks, summer home tracts, etc.
3. Level 3: low use areas and low volume roads, trails, waterways, or recreation facilities.

Visibility levels were identified through existing data compiled during the Forest Plan visual analysis process (Scenery Management System (SMS) 2006) and verified by field observation in September 2010. The project area has a high concern level (1) because of its high visibility from a large part of the Bitterroot Valley. It is located in middleground and background views of most viewers though screening by vegetation and topography conceals many parts of the project area. Additionally, the immediate foreground has high visual sensitivity because of the high level of recreation use.

Sensitive Areas

Use Areas are locations that receive concentrated public viewing use. They include vista points, trailheads, campgrounds, recreation residences, parks, ski resorts, and other recreation sites. Use areas can also include urban areas, towns, suburbs, or other public lands and gathering places. Travelways represent linear concentrations of public viewing, including freeways, highways, roads, railroads, trails, commercial flight paths, rivers, canals, and other waterways.

Table 3.4- 1 identifies use areas and travelways not completely screened from the proposed treatment areas by vegetation or topography. The Distance Zone and Concern Level were identified from the 2006 SMS and verified from field observation.

Table 3.4- 1: Summary of Sensitive Areas: Travelways and Use Areas

NAME	DESCRIPTION	VIEW DIRECTION	DISTANCE ZONE	CONCERN LEVEL
Trail #580/ Lake Como Loop	Open to partially screened views.	North	Foreground/ Middleground	2, Moderate
Lake Como	Open views.	North	Foreground/ Middleground	1, High
Lake Como Road	Open to partially screened views. Adjacent to the project area.	West	Immediate foreground/ Foreground/ Middleground	1, High
Highway 93	Open to partially screened views from vegetation and topography	Southwest	Middleground, Background	1, High
Little Rock Trailhead	Partially screened views.	Northeast	Foreground	2, Moderate
Lost Horse Road	Open to partially screened views.	Southeast	Foreground	1, High
Trail #5621	Open to partially screened views.	All	Foreground	2, Moderate
Lost Horse Observation Point	Open views from edge of cliff.	Southeast	Middleground, Background	2, Moderate

NAME	DESCRIPTION	VIEW DIRECTION	DISTANCE ZONE	CONCERN LEVEL
Private residences	Open to partially screened views. Several homes are situated to take advantage of the view of the project? area.	Southwest	Foreground, Middleground, & Background	1, High
Forest Road #5621	Views from the roadway are open. Traverses the project area.	Southwest	Middleground, Background	2, Moderate
Other Forest Roads	Views are mostly all screened unless adjacent or traversing project.	All	Immediate foreground/ Foreground/	3, Low
Three Frogs Campground	Views are mostly screened but glimpses of project area are visible through trees.	Northwest	Foreground	1, High
Cross Country Ski Trails	Views are partially screened because of vegetation and topography.	All	Middleground	1, High

Viewsheds and Viewpoints

Viewsheds are visible portions of the landscape seen from viewing locations. Three levels of screening were also considered based on intervening terrain, vegetation, and or structures. Open views exhibit minimal to no screening; partially screened views include areas where viewing opportunities are intermittent; screened views include areas where terrain, vegetation, or buildings obscure views. The level of screening within the project area varies greatly.

Figure 3.4- 1 identifies area screened by topography using a Geographic Information System (GIS) 10 meter Digital Elevation Model. The areas shown in light red are completely screened (i.e. a standing individual would not have a view of the proposed treatment area from this location). However, areas not screened by topography may be partially screened by vegetation, structures, or by topography not within the limits of the 10-meter elevation accuracy. Figure 3.4- 1 identifies large portions of land area that can be eliminated as potential viewing areas and focuses the inventory on travelways and use areas with potential views of the proposed treatments.

The heavily used Highway 93 corridor and connected secondary roads provide intermittently open views. Structures and vegetation comprise most of the screening. The open views expose the upper north and east facing slopes of the treatment area, which are visible from middleground and background views. Views from trails or roads within the foreground of the analysis area are primarily screened by vegetation except where these travelways are within or adjacent to proposed treatment units. Views from Lake Como are open to some south facing units in the foreground.

Numerous viewpoints were identified including residences, recreational facilities, and travelways. A selection of these typical viewpoints were documented and included as part of this inventory. The following viewpoints were selected because they best represent critical views of the proposed treatments from use areas and travelways (Figure 3.4- 2 thruFigure 3.4- 9).

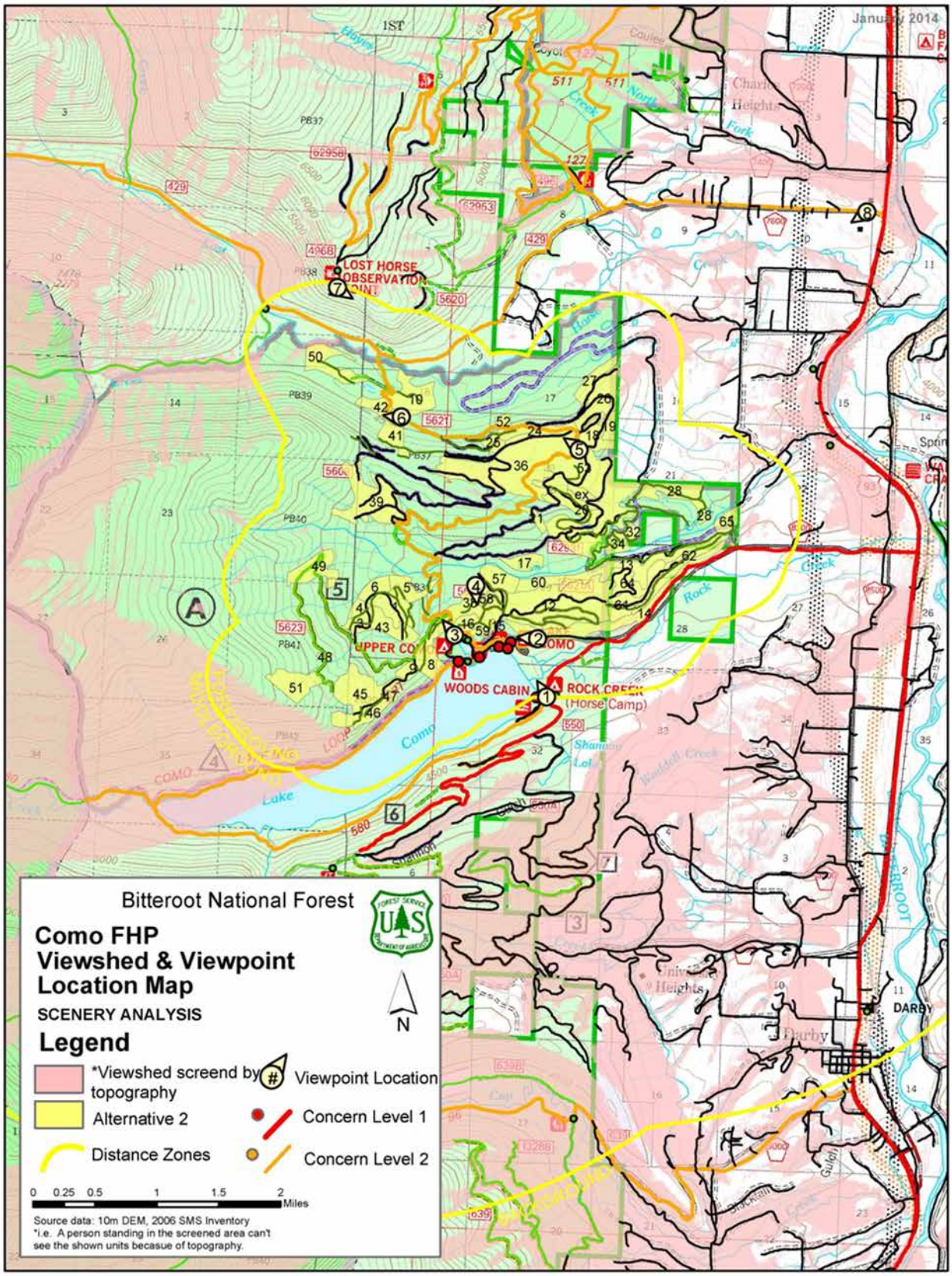

Figure 3.4- 1: Viewshed and Viewpoint Location Map

Figure 3.4- 2: Viewpoint 1–Lake Como. View North into Analysis Area from Boat Launch.

Figure 3.4- 3: Viewpoint 2–Lake Como Road. View Looking West from Road. Hillside in foreground.

Figure 3.4- 4: Viewpoint 3– Recreation Area. Immediate foreground View from Forest Road 5621 (west).

Figure 3.4- 5: Viewpoint 4–Meadow. View Looking South

Figure 3.4- 6: Figure 2-6. Viewpoint 5–Forest Road 5621 (north). Immediate foreground view

Figure 3.4- 7: Viewpoint 6– Forest Road 5621 (south) immediate foreground view.

Figure 3.4- 8: Viewpoint 7–Lost Horse Observation Point. Open view south.

Figure 3.4- 9: Viewpoint 8–Lost Horse Road/ Hwy 93 Middleground view of foothills (southwest).

Scenic Attractiveness

Scenic Attractiveness is the primary indicator of the intrinsic beauty of a landscape. It determines the level of importance of scenic beauty based on commonly held perceptions of landform, vegetation patterns, compositions, water, and land use patterns and cultural features (USDA 1995, Section 1-4 page 12). Higher levels occur in landscapes with positive combinations of variety, vividness, mystery, intactness, coherence, harmony, uniqueness, pattern, and balance. Landscape elements are rated at various levels of scenic values or attractiveness and forest landscape character descriptions serve as the frame of reference for determining scenic attractiveness. The 2006 SMS forest-wide inventory shows areas around the lake as Class A Distinctive and the majority of the analysis area as Class B Typical providing common scenic quality.

Scenic Class

Scenic Class combines the visibility and scenic attractiveness to identify area of public scenic value. Scenic classes from the 2006 SMS inventory range from 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest). Most of the analysis area is Class 2. A large portion in the south end of the analysis is Class 1 because of the high visibility and use associated with the recreation area (PF-SCENERY-00X Scenic Class map).

Existing Scenic Integrity

Existing Scenic Integrity is determined on the basis of visual changes that detract from the scenic quality of the area. The existing scenic integrity was determined through ground surveys of the project area and adjacent lands. Viewed from the use areas and travelways documented earlier, the project area has low to high scenic integrity relative to the respective settings. The proposed treatment areas are largely intact, appear natural, and have a high existing scenic integrity. Exception are areas where the edge of vegetation changes along the forest boundary. Additionally, visible cut and fill areas along the roads in the project area decrease the intactness and appear unnatural on the landscape. At a landscape scale the analysis area has high scenic integrity.

3.4.2.2 Desired Condition

Visual Quality Objectives

Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) establish the overall importance of scenic resources and sets an objective for the Bitterroot National Forest lands (Figure 1.3-2). Within the Forest Plan,

VQOs are identified geographically by management area and in narrative. The VQOs in the project area are Retention, Partial Retention, Modification and Maximum Modification and are defined as follows:

- *Retention*: Management activities are not visually evident. Activities may only repeat form, line, color, and texture, which are frequently found in the characteristic landscape. Change in their qualities of size, amount, intensity, direction, and pattern, of the characteristic landscape should not be evident.
- *Partial Retention*: Management activities remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape when managed according to the partial retention visual quality objective. Activities may repeat form, line, color, or texture common to the characteristic landscape but change in the qualities of size, amount, intensity, direction, and pattern remain subordinate to the visual strength of the characteristic landscape.
- *Modification*: Management activities may dominate the original characteristic landscape. However, activities that change vegetation and landform must borrow from the naturally established form, line, color, or texture so completely and at such a scale that its visual characteristics are those of natural occurrences within the surrounding character type. Additional parts of these activities such as structure, road, slash, root wads must remain visually subordinate to the proposed composition.
- *Maximum Modification*: Vegetation and landform alterations may dominate the characteristic landscape. However, when viewed as background, the visual characteristics must be those of natural occurrence within the surrounding area or character type. When viewed as foreground or middle ground, they may not appear to completely borrow from the natural established form, line, color, or texture. Alterations may also be out of scale, or contain detail, which is incongruent with the natural occurrences as seen in foreground and middleground. Introduction of additional parts of these activities such as structures, roads, slash, and root wads must remain visually subordinate to the proposed composition as viewed in the background.

Landscape Character Goals, Objectives, and Standards

The Bitterroot National Forest Land Management Plan contains direction for managing the scenic resources of the forest. Direction is contained in both forest-wide and Management Area (MA)-specific sections of the Plan. Direction relevant to the Como Forest Health project area is summarized below.

- Forest-wide Visual Quality Goal (page II-2):
  - Goal #4: Maintain a high level of visual quality on landscapes seen from population centers, major travel routes, and adjacent to fishing streams.
- Forest-wide Desired Conditions (page II-13-15):
  - 2b. refers to conditions at the end of the 5th decade of the Forest Plan. Desired condition states that roads and timber harvests should not be readily visible from major roads and trail corridors.
- Forest-wide Visual Quality Standards (page II-19):
  - d1. Assigns time requirements for openings to recover prior to harvesting adjacent stands.
  - d2. Openings created by timber harvest should be designed to blend with natural openings to the extent practical.

d3. The size, shape, and location of areas between openings will be consistent with water and wildlife resource considerations. Documentation of rationale and tradeoffs will be required if the proposed openings are larger than the intervening leave areas.

- Management Area (MA) 1 - Visual Quality Standards (page III-3-4):
  - b1. The Visual Quality Objectives are generally maximum modification and modification (USDA 1987).
  - b2. Lands generally within 300 feet of major fisheries riparian areas and adjacent to roads and trail routes will be managed to maintain the partial retention visual quality objective (USDA 1987). Management will be developed by interdisciplinary teams and documented in project environmental analysis reports.
- Management Area (MA) 2 - Visual Quality Standards (page III-9):
  - b1. The Visual Quality Objectives is modification (USDA 1987).
- Management Area (MA) 3a - Visual Quality Standards (page III-16):
  - b1. The visual quality objective is partial retention (USDA, 1987)
  - b2. Visually unacceptable, existing timber harvest units... will be rehabilitated by modifying unit edge to meet partial retention.
- Management Area (MA) 3c - Visual Quality Standards (page III-31):
  - b1. The visual quality objective is retention (USDA, 1977)
- Management Area (MA) 3a - Goal (page III-15):
  - 3a. Maintain the partial retention visual quality objective and manage timber. Emphasize roaded dispersed recreation activities, old growth, and big-game cover. Provide moderate levels of timber, livestock forage, and big-game forage. Restrict road density where necessary to meet visual objectives but provide access as needed for mineral exploration.
- Management Area (MA) 3c - Goal (page III-31):
  - 3a. Maintain the retention visual quality objective and manage timber. Emphasize roaded dispersed recreation activities which will enhance the use of adjacent developed recreation sites and wilderness, not degrade old growth, big-game cover. Provide low levels of timber, livestock forage, and big-game forage. Limit road density where necessary to meet visual objectives but provide access as needed for mineral exploration.

Handbook Direction pertaining to the Scenic Resources:

In addition to Forest Plan direction, the following handbooks apply to National Forest Service lands under the Visual Management System. Definitions, guidance and procedure for managing the scenic resources are contained in the following Forest Service Handbooks:

- US Department of Agriculture. Agriculture Handbook 462. National Forest Landscape Management, v. 2, chapter 1: The Visual Management System. 1974.
- US Department of Agriculture. Agriculture Handbook 483. National Forest Landscape Management, v. 2, chapter 4: Roads. 1977.
- US Department of Agriculture. Agriculture Handbook 559. National Forest Landscape Management, v. 2, chapter 5: Timber. 1980.
- US Department of Agriculture. Agriculture Handbook 608. National Forest Landscape Management, v. 2, chapter 6: Fire. 1985.

(The above references can be found at http://fsweb.r1.fs.fed.us/rmlhw/scenery_mgmt/scenery.htm.)

3.4.3 Environmental Consequences

3.4.3.1 Methodology

The scenery resources inventory consisted of a detailed evaluation of the proposed project area. The project inventory and analysis is consistent with the principles of the SMS (USDA Forest Service (1995)) and the VMS (USDA Forest Service (1974), National Forest Landscape Management, Volume 2, Chapter 1, and the Agriculture Handbooks listed in the previous section.

Terminology used in this analysis follows the current SMS system. However, because the Forest Plan has not been updated to follow this system, the Visual Quality Objectives are described using the previous VMS system. The project inventory was conducted in 2013. The forest-wide SMS inventory was updated in 2006 and is used in this analysis. The purpose of the scenery resources inventory is to identify and document landscape scenery and views of the analysis area. Project effects on scenery resources were assessed by determining the potential to change landscape character relative to Forest Plan direction. Key components of the assessment included evaluating existing and desired landscape character, existing scenic integrity, scenic attractiveness, scenic class, visibility, visual absorption capacity, and visual quality objectives.

Measurable visual elements like dominance, degree of deviation, and intactness define the level of scenic integrity. Concern levels and distance zones relative to viewsheds define visibility. Three dimentional modeling from viewpoints identified potential change.

The primary criterion for determining the project's effect is scenic integrity levels or Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). To determine the project's effects, the potential change in landscape character was measured against the VQOs. Failure to achieve the VQO specified in the Forest Plan would result in an "adverse" effect. Achievement of the specified VQO could result in a "beneficial" effect. Additional terms used to describe intensity of impacts include:

- *Negligible*: A majority of all visitors would not notice any effects or changes to the landscape. Mitigation or design criteria would not be necessary.
- *Minor*: The desired landscape character would be changed, but not evident. Long-term deviations repeat form, line, and color, and the effects on the valued landscape remain the same or "appear" intact; or effects would be short-term. If mitigation or design criteria were necessary to offset adverse effects on scenery resources, it would be relatively simple and would likely be successful.
- *Moderate*: Effects would slightly alter the landscape character. Long-term deviations would be subordinate to the landscape character. Short-term effects could have a greater deviation but would recover to express intactness and natural appearance. Mitigation would reduce long-term impacts.
- *Major*: Effects would dominate the landscape character. There would be substantial consequences to the scenic resources. Effects to the visual resources would be very obvious, widespread, and long term. Intactness of the landscape would be greatly altered. Mitigation may help reduce impact but impacts would remain evident or even dominant.

Spatial and Temporal Context for Effects Analysis

Views into the project area from sensitive areas and non-Forest lands (i.e. private lands) were documented. Sensitive travelways and use areas for this analysis are described in Table 3.4- 1. The viewed units within the "seen" area as determined from the sensitive areas made up the spatial boundary for assessing direct and indirect effects. All viewed lands within the "seen" areas made up the spatial boundaries for assessing cumulative effects.

The temporal boundary used to describe effects varied from "immediate upon project completion" up to five years (short-term). Effects visible for more than five years after completion of management activities are defined as long-term. The criteria below were used to determine whether the "duration of impact" was met for each VQO upon implementation of a management activity.

- Retention -Immediate reduction in form, line, color and texture contrast… (USDA Forest Service 1974, p. 30).
- Partial Retention VQO - "As soon after project completion as possible or at a minimum within the first year" (USDA Forest Service 1974, p. 32).
- Modification VQO - "Reduction in the form, line, color, and texture should be accomplished in the first year or at a minimum should meet existing regional guideline." (USDA Forest Service 1974, p. 34).
- Maximum Modification VQO– "Reduction of contrast should be accomplished in five years." (USDA Forest Service 1974, p. 36).

Cumulative effects were analyzed for a 20-year period, which is the approximate time regrowth would need to occur before impacts would appear negligible within the characteristic landscape.

3.4.3.2 Connected Actions, Past, Present, and Foreseeable Activities Relevant to Cumulative Effects Analysis

Past vegetation treatment within the viewsheds that are still visible are relevant to this analysis. Also, all current and planned harvesting and burning within the viewshed on public and private lands are relevant and described in each alternative section.

3.4.3.3 Alternative 1 – No Action

Direct Effects

Under the no action alternative, no project activities would occur and there would be no direct effect to landscape character associated with the project area. There would be no change to the landscape character and therefore no direct change in future scenic integrity of the project area from existing conditions (Table 3.4- 2).

Indirect Effects

Potential indirect effects on landscape character of the project area under the No Action Alternative would be potential risk of ponderosa pine mortality from mountain pine beetle infestation if conditions continue to favor population growth. In addition, if large-scale disease occurred, the potential fire hazard would increase in the short term until the red-brown dead needles fell from the trees and later when trees begin to fall over. In the event of a wildfire, the resultant fire scars would potentially have a long term major effect and be damaging to the scenic integrity, which would be barren compared to the surrounding landscape. These impacts would lower the intactness of the landscape and create a dominance of short term contrasting color or even long term burn contrast if the beetle

infestation and fire occurred on a large scale. However, if wildfire and disease occurred within natural regimes the effects of disease and wildfire would be negligible on scenic integrity.

Table 3.4- 2: Visual Quality Impacts Summary from Representational Viewpoint Location

#	Viewpoint Name	Landscape Visibility[1]	VQO(s)[2]	Change in Landscape Character[2]			
				No Action	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4
1	Lake Como	FG,MG/1	Retention	No Change	Would not meet VQO	Would not meet VQO	Would meet VQO
2	Lake Como Road	MG,FG/1	Retention	No Change	Would not meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO
3	Recreation Area	IFG/2	Retention	No Change	Would not meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO
4	Meadow	FG,MG/2	Partial Retention	No Change	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO
5	Forest Road 5621 (North)	IFG/2	Modification	No Change	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO
6	Forest Road 5621 (South)	IFG/2	Partial Retention	No Change	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO
7	Lost Horse Observation Point	MG, BG/2	Partial Retention, Modification	No Change	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO
8	Lost Horse Road/Hwy 93 Corridor	MG/1	Modification/Max. Modification	No Change	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO	Would meet VQO

[1] Viewing Distance/Concern (Sensitivity) Level (MG=middleground, FG = Foreground, IFG = Immediate Foreground)

[2] Highest VQO(s) visible unit from viewpoint locations

Cumulative Effects

The project area, surrounding viewshed, and the Bitterroot Valley viewshed form the cumulative effects analysis area of Alternative 1, No Action Alternative. Several previous timber harvests, prescribed burns, and fires have occurred and are likely to continue to occur on both private and public lands in the viewsheds of the Bitterroot Valley and Highway 93 corridor. Fuel reduction projects, Como Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project and Lost Moose Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project,are planned or have occurred in the viewshed. These projects would show cut stumps, boundary paint marking, and slash in addition to contrasting blackened burnt boles, vegetation, and soil. These signs of disturbance would lower the intactness in the short-term and have minor effects. These types of impacts would not occur in the No Action Alternative. The potential risk of reddish brown dead pine trees on the surrounding slopes would show a short-term contrast in color. The impacts associated with insect infestation and wildfire is foreseeable but the level of impacts to future scenic integrity is unknown. The No Action Alternative compared to the other alternatives would contribute to dead and dying trees within the viewsheds but would have minor cumulative effects and would not change the landscape character of the surrounding viewshed.

3.4.3.4 Compliance with Forest Plan and Other Relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies and Plans

The No Action Alternative would comply with Forest Plan scenery goal, standards, and objectives because the resulting effects would not increase visible roads (Forest-wide Desired Conditions, 2b) and would meet the VQOs.

3.4.3.5 Summary of Effects

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no immediate effect to the landscape character of the analysis areas. The No Action Alternative would meet the Forest Plan VQOs.

3.4.3.6 Effects of Alternatives 2, 3, and 4

Direct Effects

Direct visual effects of Alternatives 2, 3 and 4 are described by the type of unit treatment and include the road effects associated with the unit. The effects analysis uses the representational viewpoints as a baseline and description for change in landscape character. Additionally, all of the proposed units and roads were analyzed for site-specific impacts.

Alternative 2

Prescribed Fire Units: Prescribed fire would be planned on approximately 1,319 acres. Prescribed fire areas would appear as natural occurrences as mosaics of blackened areas and contrasting adjacent non-burned areas. Distance middleground views and background views from the Bitterroot Valley and Lake Como Recreation Area are mostly screened but where openings in the vegetation would expose the burn, a natural appearing disturbance would contrast in color and texture showing areas of brown or dead vegetation against greener areas. The visual contrast would have minor negative effects, being more prevalent in foreground views of Como Lake. These short-term impacts would not be evident within a few years. Additionally, according to findings in Social Science to Improve Fuels Management: A synthesis of Research on Aesthetics and Fuel Management (2000), low-severity fires can improve scenic integrity of an area as an indirect effect. The prescribed burning would improve the forest health of the treatment areas and the stability of the landscape character.

Noncommercial Thin Units: Approximately 531 acres make up the proposed noncommercial thin component of the proposed project. Change in landscape character by thinning these units would be minor to negligible from background and middleground views except where an existing unit shows a strong, unnatural contrast in line and texture next to untreated units (or heavily forested land), these include units 24, 43, and 51. In some cases, the proposed thin will accentuate an existing edge, creating greater contrast. These potential negative effects would be greatest in winter. Additionally, a limited number of units would show negative visual effects from foreground views when adjacent to roadways and trails, showing contrast from unnatural appearing slash, slash piles, and stumps and felled trees. Minor impact from paint marking would also occur. These impacts would be temporary and would not be dominant landscape features within a few years.

Commercial Harvest Units: Approximately 1,476 acres are commercial harvest, primarily as Intermediate harvests, leaving 40-60 BA, and Group or Individual Tree Selection. Group selections would create openings in the canopy. The harvests would favor seral tree, such as ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir to improve forest health. The harvests include tractor, TLM (track line machine), and skyline yarding systems. Visual impacts associated with the above yarding systems will vary depending on the amount of vegetation removed during implementation. Each harvest unit was analyzed for potential impacts. General visual impacts

associated with these yarding systems include soil disturbance, skid trails, landing pads, skyline or cable corridors, paint marking, scattered slash and slash piles, and tree stumps. Additionally, some vegetation removal from the proposed units would create negative edge and silhouette effects in Units 62, 28, 18, 16, and 8. Roads and TLM trail construction would show contrast in color and form from cut and fill. Some of these effects will appear unnatural, contrasting in shape, line, form, and texture within the characteristic landscape. The majority of units will have minor to moderate impacts, however, the cable yarding units with high visibility would have major long-term impacts, primarily from contrasting line and texture associated with skyline corridors(Table 3.4- 2).

Treatment units that would not meet the Forest Plan VQOs as proposed in Alternative 2, include: 8, 9, 15, 16, 45, 46, and 47. Portions of units 9 and 45 would become more visible with openings created by treatment of foreground units. Roads, landing pads and skyline corridors would create line form elements that would contrast with the natural appearing landscape.

The intactness of the landscape would not meet the retention VQO after project implementation.

Alternative 3

Prescribed Fire Units: Approximately 922 acres(380 acres of low severity and 542 acres of moderate severity) would be treated by prescribed fire only; no timber harvest or thinning would occur prior to burning. Effects from the prescribed burns would be similar to Alternative 2. A reduction in treatment impacts from prescribed burning would correlate to the reduced area treated. These short-term impacts would not be evident within a few years. Additionally, according to research findings in *Social Science to Improve Fuels Management: A synthesis of Research on Aesthetics and Fuel Management* (2000), low-intensity fires can improve scenic integrity of an area. The proposed alternative would improve the forest health of the treatment areas and the stability of the landscape character.

Noncommercial Thin Units: Approximately 929 acres make up the proposed noncommercial thin component of the Alternative. This increase in non-commercial thinning from Alternative 2 reduces understory fuels in the burn units to achieve the appropriate burn severity in the prescribed fire units. Visual impacts would be similar to Alternative 2 but because of an increase in noncommercial treatment the overall impacts would be reduced. Unit 8 is a noncommercial harvest unit and would be thinned by hand crews. This treatment would be monitored during implementation in order to comply with the Retention VQO, which would require feathering the unit edge and creating a pattern of vegetation removal that is not evident.

Commercial Harvest Units: Approximately 1,295 acres of harvest would have similar treatment impacts as Alternative 2 but without the same road impacts. Additionally sensitive views from Lake Como area have fewer impacts because the contrasting skyline units, except unit 47, would not be harvested. Soil disturbance, landing pads, and cable corridors in Unit 47 (5 acres) would be visible from the sensitive Lake Como viewshed. Harvesting Unit 47 would cause this alternative to not meet the retention VQO and this unit would have moderate to major impacts on the Lake Como Viewshed. A reduction in the number of visible units from the Lake Como Recreation Area would correlate to a reduced impact compared to Alternative 2. However, Unit 47, and parts of Units 9 and 45 would not meet Forest Plan VQOs. Unit 43 is a commercial harvest in this alternative and this unit would have moderate impacts on the Lake Como viewshed, but would meet the VQO.

Alternative 4

Prescribed Fire Units: Approximately 202 acres would have prescribed fire, only. Effects from the prescribed burns would be similar to Alternatives 2 and 3. A reduction in treatment impacts from prescribed burning would generally correlate to the reduced area treated, which is less than both Alternative 2 and 3. This is particularly evident along Lake Como Road which has a high concern level.

Noncommercial Thin Units: Approximately 770 acres make up the proposed noncommercial thin component of this alternative. This increase in non-commercial thinning from Alternative 2 reduces understory fuels in the burn units to achieve the appropriate burn severity in the prescribed fire units. Visual impacts would be similar to Alternative 2. However, there would be more area of noncommercial thinning, which would reduce overall impacts and would retain more trees for screening. Alternative 4 has less noncommercial thinning then Alternative 3. Unit 8 is designed as a noncommercial harvest unit and would be thinned by handcrews. Thinning would be monitored during implementation to comply with the Retention VQO.

Commercial Harvest Units: Approximately 1,115 acres of harvest would have similar treatment impacts as Alternative 2. Additionally sensitive views from Lake Como area have fewer impacts without the contrasting skyline units. This alternative meet all of the VQOs.

Aspen Regeneration Units: Conifers would be removed from approximately 39 acres of aspen clones in Units 70, 73, 74, 75. Impacts of cut stumps, felled trees, and slash piles would lower the intactness of the landscape but as the aspen regenerates and the slash decomposes, the increase in tree species diversity would be a long-term beneficial effect on scenery.

Indirect Effects

Low intensity burning treatments can actually improve scenic quality (Social Science to Improve Fuels Management: A synthesis of Research on Aesthetics and Fuel Management (2000)). This would be evident in more diverse landscapes with mosaics of vegetation increasing the scenic attractiveness of an area.

Cumulative Effects

The cumulative effects analysis area includes the Como Forest Health project area, viewsheds surrounding Lake Como and Lost Horse road, and the Bitterroot Valley. Previous timber harvests, prescribed fires, and wildland fires have occurred and are likely to continue to occur on both private and public lands in the viewsheds of the Bitterroot Valley and Highway 93 corridor. Fuel reduction projects like the completed Como Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project and the planned Lost Moose Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project occur in the viewshed, which would show impacts of cut stumps, paint marking (boundary or tree), and slash in addition to contrasting blackened burned boles, vegetation, and soil that would lower the intactness for a short term having minor effects. The present and reasonably foreseeable impacts of nearby blackened earth and patches of brown trees from prescribed burns and wildfires, and line and texture contrast associated with openings from harvest treatments on public and private lands may be evident in distant middle ground and background views. Because of the sloping terrain and intensity of tree reduction within the action alternatives, there would be negligible impacts that would contribute to cumulative effects within the viewshed. The scenic integrity of an area would not have significant impacts as a result for any of alternatives. The long term effects of a healthier stand conditions have would have some beneficial impact to the collectively viewed landscape and the negative impacts associated with each alternative

individually would not reach a threshold of lowering to overall landscape character of the defined cumulative effects analysis area.

3.4.3.7 Compliance with Forest Plan and Other Relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies and Plans

Alternatives 4, as designed, will meet forest plan goals and standards. Portions of Alternative 2 cable system units 8, 9, 15, 16, 45, 46, and 47 would not meet the following forest goals and standards:

- Maintain a high level of visual quality on landscapes seen from population centers, major travel routes, and adjacent to fishing streams (Forest-wide Visual Quality Goal (page II-2))
- …desired condition states that roads and timber harvests should not be readily visible from major roads and trail corridors (Forest-wide Desired Conditions (page II-13-15))
- Management Area (MA) 3c -- Visual Quality Standards (page III-31): b1. The visual quality objective is retention (USDA, 1977)

3.4.3.8 Summary of Effects

In Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, Units 8, 9, 15, 16, 45, 46, and 47 would have major long term effects in the immediate foreground of the Lake Como Recreation Area roads, trails and water area. Other units are screened by topography and vegetation or are viewed at greater distances in lower VQO areas. The effects in these screened units would be short-term and recover within five years of project implementation. The treatment effects in the screened units would be reduced contrasting elements (slash piles, stumps, landings, and temporary and permanent roads). Excluding the units in the Lake Como Recreation Area viewshed (retention VQO), most of the proposed treatments in Alternative 2 would meet the VQOs of partial retention and modification, as well as, meet the Forest Plan goal and standards for scenery. Reducing the risk of disease, insect infestation, and high severity fire and increasing vegetation diversity would have some beneficial long-term impact and increased sustainability to the visual quality of the landscape.

Alternative 3 would not cause a long-term change in the landscape character, with the exception of Unit 47. Long-term impacts from Unit 47 (5 acres) would be visible from the sensitive Lake Como viewshed and not meet the retention VQO. Mitigating measures in some of the other proposed treatment units would moderate scenery effects to be less evident a growing season after treatment. However, treatments would dominate in the short-term from immediate foreground views of the Lake Como Recreation Area roads, trails, campgrounds and trailhead. Most of the proposed treatments would meet the Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) of partial retention and meet the Forest Plan goal and standards for scenery. With the reduced risk of insect and disease infestation and wildland fire and increasing stand diversity there are beneficial long term impacts and increased sustainability to the visual quality of the landscape.

Alternative 4 would not cause a long-term change in the landscape. In the short-term, effects of project activities would dominate in the immediate foreground views of the Lake Como Recreation Area roads, trails, campgrounds, and trailhead. Mitigation measures and design features would moderate scenery effects to be less evident a growing season after treatment. This alternative would meet the Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) and Forest Plan goals and standards for scenery. It would have long-term, beneficial impacts on landscape visual quality because it reduces the risks of insect and disease infestation and wildland fire, renews the presence of aspen, and increases stand diversity.